

# ON EROS, COMMUN- ICATION, DESIRE AND SEMIO- CAPITALISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCO BERARDI

A portion of this interview took place via Skype in a class at Centro, the Applied Arts School in Mexico City, on 8 May 2015, in my documentary cinema class. I would like to thank the students who took part, especially Gabriela Hinojosa for sharing her technical wisdom to make this interview possible. And of course Franco Berardi ("Bifo"), for his availability and generosity in answering our questions and sharing his thoughts with us in spite of undergoing difficult times. Franco has frequently written about the basis of erotic relationships by focusing on the transformation of sensibility, the processes of communication and the changing status of the Other, within the frame of what he calls

"semiocapitalism": a period characterized by the digitalization of communication, the prevalence of cognitive labour and the financialization of the economy. Ironically, we failed to finish the interview via digital communications; after two attempts and a short Skype conversation, he was kind enough to type the rest of his answers for us.

Irmgard Emmelhainz on behalf of Scapegoat In your new book, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (Verso, 2015), you discuss the term "bio-semiocapitalism," which describes not only how creativity, expressiveness, affection, emotion, communication and participation—the qualities of "cognitive labour"—have been incorporated as productive factors into the economy, but also how this incorporation has infiltrated the nervous cells of conscious, sensible organisms, taking hold of the collective unconscious, culture, and sensibility. This is the main cause not only of an anthropological mutation that has radically changed the ways in which we interact with each other—within increasingly competitive environments, to the detriment of solidarity—but also a *cognitive* mutation, which you have linked in your work to automatization. In turn, automatization is related to early language learning from machines, as opposed to from the mother, and to exposure to digital communication from a young age. In your view, what are the consequences of these mutations (cognitive and anthropological) in the realms of erotic relationships and sexuality?

Franco Berardi Well, this question implies many levels of reflection, and I will answer in a nuanced way. So, first of all, what are the meaning and the function of these kinds of new technologies? And by new technologies I mean systemic tools for the automation of labour, and labour relations.

Everybody knows what automation is in a factory, when a machine takes the place of a manual worker, but it is more meaningful when automation implies the replacement of intellectual activity, because in some way it also implies a transformation of the very emotionality of human beings. This is the new phase of automation, the phase that we are facing nowadays. We cannot imagine that such

a transformation, particularly as it concerns the automation of intellectual activity, the digitalization of communication, and so on, will have no consequences, no effects on the very intellectual activity of human beings. Particularly, the more communication becomes an exchange of information through a screen, the more human bodies become accustomed to being in a distant relation. So that implies that emotional and bodily perception has changed, that they have mutated in one way or another through the processes of digitalization.

SG And how would you say that this automation of emotion affects erotic relations and sexuality?

FB Of course, sexuality is a difficult subject because it's the most intimate level of the human mind, of human emotionality. But according to data revealed by recent research, for instance, concerning the consumption of pornography for obtaining pleasure, or about the growing disaffection of the erotic relation between people in these images, some changes can be inevitable. In the end, in my opinion, if we are not going towards the oblivion and disappearance of human bodily relations and sexual relations, we are going towards a growing disappearance of the very space of sexuality, effectuated by digital media. And we can mention that people are more and more taken by mediated relations. In terms of time, it is quite simple: there is not enough time. The more time we spend in front of a screen relating to distant people, the less we live in a bodily relation with them. And this is particularly meaningful for young people who start investing their affective life in mediated social networks. I think that this is changing something in a deeper way in the human perception of the other's body.

SG And this is related to your notions of "connection" and "conjunction." You discuss a further development you saw in South Korea, the "individualization and cabling of the collective mind" by way of digital communications. This double phenomenon implies the transformation of the organism into a smooth, flowing interface, forcing the individual to adapt to a given format

to communicate, in order to render his or her enunciation compatible with the code. Can you discuss the passage from conjunction, to connection, to individualization and cabling, and how these passages have transformed love and desire?

FB When I travelled to Seoul, I was surprised by the amount of time people spend with their smartphones everywhere, in everyday places like shops, coffee parlours, homes, streets, etc. I was impressed, for instance, by the fact that people do not walk on the streets looking at the buildings or at the landscape because they are using Google Maps to navigate the city, the physical space around them. And as I started to investigate the subject, I came to understand that South Korea is number one in connectivity worldwide, but a very interesting point is that South Korea is also number one in suicide rate, particularly among young people. I also discovered that Koreans are not historically accustomed to killing themselves; no, this is a new phenomenon. Twenty, thirty years ago, the suicide rate was forty times lower, and this has grown over the last twenty years. So I got interested in thinking about the phenomenon of suicide together with connectivity, and I can tell you that the country with the second highest suicide rate is England, where the level of connectivity is extremely high, and the third is Japan. And so, I think that, of course, I don't dislike smartphones, but using them immensely transforms our ability to communicate and understand each other. At the same time, I became aware of the effects of digital communication, which are psychopathological.

I'm interested in the dissociation between connection and conjunction because I think that the human race has always lived in a relation that I call "conjunctive," which is based on the resonance of meaning based on contact, on the erotic space, on bodily language, and so on. All of the sudden, we are entering a new kingdom, a spatial relation where conjunction is replaced by connectivity. And what is connectivity? Connectivity is a form of language based on a format. You

cannot connect if you do not respect the format. This is changing something because the exchange of meaning is not based on the frame or the context, but more and more on the format. This is a philosophical subject that in my opinion has to be analyzed. But in short, I can tell you that conjunction means a bodily investigation of meaning. Connection means that there's a pre-existing format that creates the possibility of accessing meaning. And this is going to affect the evolution of the human mind.

SG So, conjunction has more to do with bodily presence, touching, and spending time together?

FB Absolutely, yes, conjunction means a relation between "round" bodies, in the sense that they are not regular or smooth. They are looking for a possibility of contact, searching in an indeterminate way, in the sense of looking for a possibility, or a way to understand each other. When you enter the domain of connectivity, you're not searching anymore, because you find [each other] right away at the beginning, because the answer is implied in the format. So I would say that connectivity is the opposite of round forms; in connectivity there are segments to be connected to each other according to a pre-existing format.

SG So it would kind of be like automation versus poetry?

FB Let's say it's automated language versus the voice. And poetry is the voice, bodily voice. And what is the voice? Voice is the singularity of language, voice is the point of conjunction between meaning and the body. And poetry is the same, poetry is the relation between meaning and the infinite range of possible forms of sound, of nuance, of imbrication, of irony, of not the unsaid but said in another way. You know, poetry and voice are the conjunctive form of language. Then we enter the realm of syntax, which is the dominating form of connective language. Syntax is the pre-structural form of the relation between the parts of an enunciation. Computers understand each other because they are syntactically exact. We do not understand each other because we are syntactically inexact: we could say

something and mean the opposite of what we say, because we understand each other thanks to our body, thanks to our eyes, thanks to our voice. The tools, the different tools of the voice, open universes of meaning.

SG Can you talk a little bit about how language is being used more and more pragmatically? You discuss this in *Heroes*, your new book.

FB Yes, pragmatics is the dimension of the effects of language, what language is doing at the level of interaction. So, I say that in the age of digitalization language is more and more reduced to the syntactical level, but at the same time, what gets played out are the pragmatic effects of this reduction of language to syntax. Generally speaking, the pragmatics of communication is the sphere in which words produce bodily effects, or practical effects. What happens at the pragmatic level, when our interaction, our communication, becomes more and more syntactic and therefore formatted? This is a problem that also concerns politics, because politics changes deeply when we have to follow precise procedures or protocols of interaction transmitted through social networks. For instance, Facebook is a simulation of communication. It is simulating well, but still is a simulation. And yet, this form of communication can be extremely useful for daily life, and for political life.

SG We could argue that one of the traits of semiocapitalism is that it turns desire into signs to be consumed. In this transformation, not only is the referent lost, but also difference is levelled out. In its transformation of everything into the same, semiocapitalism causes the erosion or the disappearance of the Other. This has radical consequences for erotic experience, but could we go as far as to argue that this signals the end of love? Would it be possible to recuperate the otherness of the Other? And how?

FB The end of love is a little bit too much, and let's say that semiocapitalism is based on the transformation of the process of production, the process of capital organization into semiotic processes. This means that capital accumulation is subsuming and capturing

the flow of language, and therefore the flow of emotionality as well. The problem of resistance, of autonomy, of the creation of common spaces is lost... [*Connection was lost*]

SG For the Surrealists, freeing desire from repression was thought of as a new kind of love, a universal force and a poetic revolution of language and existence, a force of renewal, the aspiration of a new form of life and society. And yet, for Michel Houellebecq, the sexual revolution in the 1960s—as a communal utopia—became merely a step toward individualism, toward the ongoing destruction of the separation between the individual and the market, which colonized affective human existence, sex, and sexuality, now part of the commercial machinery and causing suffering and unhappiness (*Les particules élémentaires*, 1998). You have argued that under semiocapitalism, love has been transformed into enjoyment, emotion, and excitation without consequence or orgasm, and that the erotic object has multiplied to the point of becoming omnipresent. Under semiocapitalism, everything is allowed and even encouraged with regards to sexuality: to seek pleasure through sex toys and sadomasochism, to experiment with different partners, to fully express and fulfill one's own sexual identity (a kind of hyper-sexual expression), what you identify as the "Just Do It!" injunction embodied in the Nike slogan. Could we consider this form of sexuality as a kind of reverse repression, as having acquired a function of subjection and control? How does this work? And can you discuss further your assertion that the ubiquity of pornography is a symptom of emotional atrophy?

FB You refer to Michel Houellebecq, and particularly to his book *Les particules élémentaires*. It's an interesting reference, indeed. His vision of the sexual revolution of the 1960s describes of the symptoms of the anthropological mutation we have been living through over the last few decades. In that novel, the 1960s generation is accused of being selfish and hedonistic, and is identified as the cause of the ensuing sexual misery. What Houellebecq is concealing, however, is that the present sexual misery is an effect of

growing isolation and loneliness. Today we live in the condition of virtual hyper-stimulation and physical isolation. This is the origin of the present psychic suffering. In other words, Houellebecq is very good at describing the present misery, although the way in which he identifies the causes of this situation is not really persuading. He's an interesting writer because his works are a symptom of the depression and widespread sadness of the present age. When I read *Les particules élémentaires* at the end of the 1990s, I immediately felt that Houellebecq was able to perceive something very deep in the forms of contemporary psychological becoming, and therefore of contemporary social and political becoming.

Houellebecq speaks of a world in which the contact with the mother has been more or less precluded. I don't care so much about his political analysis, nor his anti-feminist stance. What's interesting in his novels is the phenomenology of sadness as an effect of contemporary hyper-stimulation. But I don't take too seriously the philosophy of Houellebecq. I like his novels because they are a great introduction to the semiocapitalist psychosphere.

You use the expression "reverse repression." Yes, this is a good way to describe the paradox of ubiquitous excitement with no space and no time for emotional elaboration. You speak of reverse repression referring to the "Just Do It!" injunction," and the general obligation to be creative, expressive, and swift. Actually, I don't like to use the word repression, because it seems misleading to me, but if you want, yes, it's the contemporary form of compulsion. The hyper-stimulation of the social sensibility has a pornographic effect. What is pornography in fact? I would say that pornography is essentially sexual anorexia. Affection and sexuality are wavering between loneliness and wild predatory aggressiveness: rituals of emotional detachment, virtualization, pornography.

Sensitivity enters into a process of re-formatting: in order to be compatible with the

digital machine, language has to become the smooth exchange of information. The sexual imagination is invested in the hairless surfaces of the digital image. The first digital generation shows symptoms of emotional atrophy; there's an impressive disconnection between language and sex. In the media, advertising, television, everywhere there is talk about sex. But sex is no more talking, as it's disconnected from language. Sex is babbling, stuttering, mumbling, or screaming in a desultory way. Words are drying out.

Emotion is the meeting point between body and cognition: it's the bodily elaboration of the information reaching our mind. The time of emotionality can be fast (very fast) or it can be slow, but the elaboration of sexual emotion needs time. The spread of pornography has had the effect of shortening the time for emotional elaboration. In turn, porn is one of the causes of time saturation, one of its effects or symptoms. Pornography is part of the saturation of the info-sphere, and is simultaneously an escape from the disturbed psycho-sphere.

SG You have argued that the thickening of the info-sphere by the increasing quantity and intensity of information reduces memory, compresses time, and produces dis-identification, and that the acceleration of the fluxes of information impoverishes experience. What are the effects of this thickening and acceleration on relationality and behaviour?

FB I want to start from the definition of the concept of "cyber-time," in its relation with cyberspace. While cyberspace (being the virtual dimension of info-productive interaction between agents of communication) can be infinitely expanded, cyber-time (as the duration of individual perception) cannot be expanded beyond certain limits, as it's limited by emotional and cultural temporality, as well as by organic restrictions. The emotional and cultural elaboration of stimuli happens in time, and time for psychological and bodily elaboration cannot be shortened beyond a certain point.

The more the amount of information

demanding our attention expands, the less attention time for elaboration is available. Sensorial experience cannot be intensified beyond a limit. Therefore, acceleration is provoking an impoverishment of experience, as the intensive modalities of pleasure and knowledge are stressed to the point of exhaustion. This conflict—or incompatibility—between cyberspace and cyber-time is a marking paradox of our society, and because of capitalist exploitation it's producing pathological effects. This gap is the source of a sort of desensibilization.

SG You have defined sensibility as the capacity to grasp the meaning of that which cannot be expressed in words, and sensitivity as the capacity to feel the skin of the other as pleasure. Between the two faculties, you detect a disturbance that has caused the obliteration of vulnerability, the fact that I am unable to handle the emotion of the Other, the incapacity to understand the signs that emanate from the Other. What are, in your view, the consequences of these disturbances for the autonomous political organization of the general intellect?

FB The problem is that the possibility of organizing the general intellect does not reside in political consciousness, or will. It resides essentially in solidarity among cognitive workers, and solidarity is not so much a political or moral value, but a political declination of empathy. The disturbances in sensibility and in sensitivity have a direct influence on the ability to feel empathy, and in turn this is weakening social solidarity. Cognitive workers are particularly exposed to this for two reasons: First of all, because they work in conditions of precariousness and permanent competition, and secondly because they are particularly exposed to the nervous hyper-stimulation that comes from the info-sphere. The main problem that precarious cognitive workers—the largest part of the new generation—are facing today is the inability to start a process of organization and solidarity. Why so? Because the relation between individual workers is marked both by a lack of physical proximity and the perception of the

other as a competitor. Solidarity in fact is not only a political or moral value; its condition of possibility is empathy.

SG In a world in which competition is the general form of social relation—bringing about dissociation, alienation, fragmentation, and, as you put it, “lonely togetherness and shared isolation,” as well as a crisis of emotional self-perception and perception of others—cynicism, self-contempt, and contempt for others are prevalent, as opposed to empathy (which you define as self-love). Presented with this landscape, you have emphasized the need for collective therapy. In your view, what are the grounds for cultivating ethical behaviour in a social environment in which precariousness, randomness, impermanence, instability, and transient interpersonal relations prevail?

FB I don’t know. Frankly speaking, I don’t know how we’ll overcome the present situation of emotional distress, social isolation, and political impotence. For the moment, the experience of the last decade of social movements is showing that workers are unable to overcome this condition. The experience of Occupy—just to name the last massive experience of social rebellion—has clearly stressed this point: we reclaim urban space as a possibility of reactivating the erotic energies of solidarity. But we are unable to go beyond the symbolic act of occupation, unable to transform this act into a long-lasting process of self-organization.

SG Negativity and difference, which are the conditions of love, have been obliterated by the libidization of the economy; desire has been subjected to the formula of consumption, which implies that the I seeks in the Other a confirmation of the self, thus obliterating the vulnerability of the other. Emotional autism, the inability to handle the emotions of the Other, and the inability to handle even loss and death are the consequences of this. What are other consequences of the obliteration of the vulnerability of the Other?

FB Baudrillard has spoken of the de-erotizing effects of the libidization of the economy, as you put it. As libido is subsumed into

the cycle of production and consumption, it is deserting our emotional life. The consequence of this obliteration of the perception of the other’s vulnerability is the spreading violence and aggressiveness that are ever more prevalent in social life.

SG In your recent essay “The Neuroplastic Dilemma,” you mention the need to reverse Freud’s trajectory from language and sexuality to neurology. How are the changes in language and sexuality brought about by semicapitalism affecting or transforming the way in which cognition operates, under the light of cognitive organisms currently being forced to adapt to intolerable social and working environments? Why is it important to posit this development as “neuroplastic,” as opposed to a cultural phenomenon?

FB Speaking of neuroplasticity I don’t intend to deny that the present transformation and the ensuing pathologies have a cultural genealogy and are cultural phenomena, nor do I deny that they have to be faced on a socio-cultural basis. I simply want to investigate the effects of the techno-social environment on the hardware of the neural system. Following the suggestion of Catharine Malabou, I think that in neurological trauma we may also find the possibility of redefining the relation between our mind and the techno-environment. The concept of neuroplasticity has an ambiguous meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the flexibility and adaptability of the conscious organism, the precondition of neoliberal exploitation. But on the other, it also opens the way to the possibility of a conscious and therapeutic transformation of the mental dimension, and of the very activity of cognitive workers.

SG What kind of therapy (or line of flight, or Chaosmosis) do you envisage to counter the negative force of these anthropological and cognitive mutations? How could networked activity be “erotically recomposed” so as to provide an autonomous organizational platform for the general intellect beyond May ’68’s communal utopia?

FB This question is too difficult for me to answer. Actually, it’s the main unresolved problem that we’re facing in our social and political existence. The erotic recomposition of the cognitive body and the inauguration of a process of self-organization of the general intellect is the way out from the present condition of submission and exploitation. But we don’t know (at least I do not know) how this process can actually be started and brought about. Finding a way and starting the process of affective and political recomposition of the cognitive body is the main intellectual task of the future.

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